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THE WORK OF KARL BITTER, SCULPTOR

It is not often that an artist by sheer force of personal success is made to feel the onus of popularity, and yet one suspects this is the case with Karl Theodore Francis Bitter, who for many months has been directing the sculptural embellishments of the St. Louis Fair. Mr.

Bitter's contribution to the plastic art of this country has been nothing less than remarkable, in view of the fact that he practically had his first introduction to the public in 1892. Much of this work is so serious in conception, so replete with thought and sentiment, so skillful in execution, as to warrant its taking high rank among the notable examples of American sculpture. And yet, by a curious twist of events, it is those productions in which the artist has deepest pride that the public at large knows least about.

It has been Mr. Bitter's fortune—or misfortune—to be intimately connected with three great expositions. In 1893, on invitation of Richard M. Hunt, he designed the elaborate sculptural decorations for the Administration Building of the Chicago

his efforts that he received an urgent request from George B. Post to decorate the Liberal Arts Building of the same enterprise. Later, when the commissioners of the Pan-American Exposition applied to the National Sculpture Society for a director of sculpture, he was unanimously chosen for that office. In this position he had an opportunity to display not merely his genius



TABLET TO MRS. FOSTER
By Karl Bitter

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MOUNTED STANDARD-BEARER
By Karl Bitter



as a sculptor, but his ability as an advisor and an administrator, and so satisfactory was his work that it is no cause for wonder that he should be chosen by the directory of the St. Louis World's Fair to design and carry out the wonderful sculptural embellishments of that enterprise. The remarkable scope and beauty of these decorations are fully known to the readers of BRUSH AND PENCIL from the special sculpture issue of the magazine published last December.

Bitter's success in these three great exposition enterprises has naturally given a peculiar bent to his fame. It has laid, if not undue, at least undesired, emphasis

on his work as an organizer, as the devisor of schemes, as the director of other artists, as the producer of symbolic or festive groups designed for a commemorative or decorative purpose. In point of fact, he rather regrets his world's fair notoriety, and would prefer to have the emphasis laid, not on his ability as an organizer and an executive, not on his achievements as a decorative sculptor for festive occasions, but on his more serious and thoughtful creations, like his seated statue of Dr. Pepper and his Villard and Hubbard and Mrs. Foster memorials.

In point of fact, the artist's trend toward sculpture for architectural purposes is primarily a matter of accident, and one can see in the long list of sculptural decorations he has produced in the last ten or twelve years the direct result of the opportunity which Richard M. Hunt, the architect, his first patron, opened to him. Had chance not taken him to Hunt's office, it is quite certain that Bitter's entire development would have been different, and instead of being regarded as *par excellence* a world's fair decorator, he would likely have achieved an equally enviable reputation in other forms of plastic art. Be that as it may, it is certain that no present-day American sculptor started under more adverse circumstances, and achieved in the same length of time so wide and so well-earned a reputation. A biographical note or two will serve to show the man's indomitable energy, and the alertness and the decision of character that have determined his successful career.



STATUE OF DR. WILLIAM PEPPER
By Karl Bitter

Bitter was born in Vienna in 1867, and received his education at the Gymnasium, and subsequently at several art schools in Vienna. At the age of sixteen he was ambitious to court fortune in the New World, but neither his parents nor the government would permit the enterprise. It was not before he was twenty years of age that he arrived in New York City, applied for citizenship, and set to work as an assistant with a firm making all sorts of decorations for houses. He had neither friends nor relatives in this country, but he soon

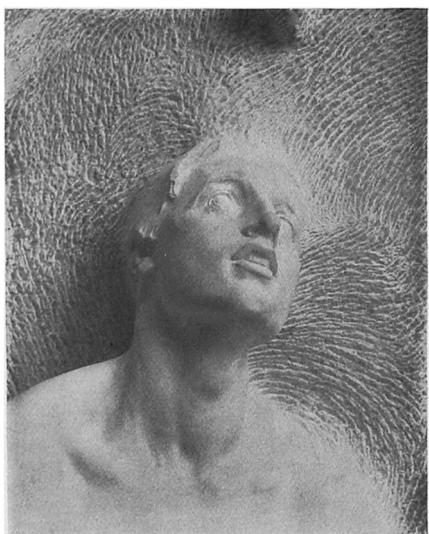
became a protégé of Richard Morris Hunt, whose monument now adorns the place opposite the Lenox Library, New York City. Mr. Hunt's prestige as an architect gave weight to his recommendations. He enjoyed the confidence of a wide and wealthy line of patrons, and the friendship that Bitter enjoyed with him proved of enormous advantage.

This is not to be regarded as an implication that the artist's success turned upon influence—it did not. Bitter had the ability, and Hunt but opened a channel for the activities of his young protégé. As a witness to the fact that the young sculptor

was able to hold his own in

fair competition with men of wider fame, it is only necessary to say that in the very first year of his residence in this country he was permitted to compete for one of the gates of Trinity Church, New York, and by sheer dint of merit won the order. It was not, however, before 1892, when commissions were given for the statuary for the White City in Chicago, that the artist became known as a sculptor from whom the world had much to expect.

Bitter's work for the Chicago Fair has been termed lawless compositions, curious rather than beautiful, which he himself to-day would perhaps admit as a just criticism. And yet it is to be doubted if less pretentious themes would have afforded opportunity for the fertility of invention and the skill of execution which Mr. Bitter wished to demonstrate. In this case he undertook to put in plastic



DETAIL, VILLARD MEMORIAL
By Karl Bitter



PEACE
By Karl Bitter



form the "Elements Controlled" and the "Elements Uncontrolled." Here certainly was ample scope for imagination, the artist gave free rein to his fancy, and he succeeded in incorporating in his work a zest and a spirit that characterized few other sculpture decorations on the grounds.

Bitter's own contributions to the sculpture of the Pan-American were the most striking features of the decorations—the great equestrian standard-bearers which surmounted the pylons of the Triumphal Bridge. Referring back to the work done for the Chicago Fair ten years previously,

Charles H. Caffin says: "These rearing horses at Buffalo, with their riders holding aloft a draped flag, had the same fling of action, only more controlled by experience. Instead of an explosion of limbs and movement, there was a sustained and concentrated energy infinitely more impressive. It is in decorative subjects of this sort, which permit a certain heroic exaggeration, that Bitter seems at his best."

And Lorado Taft, in his recently published history of American sculpture, says of these same rearing horses, that "they were among the finest things ever devised for any exposition. One does not require of festal decoration that reserve and inevitability which we demand in permanent monuments. A rearing horse is an abomination under a portrait figure, yet in these fanciful works the very instability of the pose delighted us. Mr. Bitter stood his horses almost on end; they fairly sat on their haunches and threw out their feet for balance. Like the fluttering banner above them, their exuberance filled the spectator with elation; they gave the note of joy to which the whole gala scene was attuned."

Bitter's work for the St. Louis Exposition is no less suited for the occasion, no less notable. It lacks the suggestion of immaturity that attached to the Chicago decorations; it lacks the fire and force



HUBBARD MEMORIAL—THANATOS
By Karl Bitter

of the Buffalo pieces; but its more quiet note of pure symbolism is no less effective and commendable. While speaking of Mr. Bitter's exposition achievements, it is pertinent to quote a graceful tribute paid by Mr. Taft.

"It is a part of Mr. Bitter's gift," says he, "to be able to design for a shop full of assistants and to direct the execution of many things at once. The sculptural result may not be profound, it may not take hold of one like an individual appeal, it certainly never can clutch at one's heart as do certain things of much less suavity and elegance



SIDE PANEL, MONUMENT TO DR. PEPPER
By Karl Bitter

and grace; but it is a gift indeed to be able to create spontaneously, unwearingly, these beautiful things. To make such a contribution to the charm of our cities is as worthy a work as the other. After all, the finest thing in the world is to make use of one's special distinctive gifts to the best advantage. We should feel grateful to Mr. Bitter for every one of those delightful mantelpieces and friezes, for all the spandrels and cartouches, for the whole army of graceful stone men and women, be they caryatids, evangelists, or bacchantes."

Bitter's list of commissions for the sculptural embellishment of homes and public buildings is very extensive. Many of the palatial residences of the East contain examples of his work; as, for instance, the homes of Odgen Goelet, C. P. Huntington, W. K., Cornelius, and George W. Vanderbilt, John Jacob Astor, Elbridge T. Gerry, and others scarcely less conspicuous. Possibly the most important of these commissions for home decoration is that for George W. Vanderbilt's "Biltmore," which comprised two heroic statues in

stone, a fountain group in bronze, two heroic figures carved in wood, a frieze forty-five feet in length carved in oak, a frieze in stone thirty feet in length, and other minor decorations.

More numerous and perhaps more important are the commissions received for the decoration of public buildings, libraries, churches, and the like, among which the vast reliefs for the Broad Street station of the Pennsylvania railroad at Philadelphia are conspicuous.

The sculpture for this building, as in the case of much of Bitter's work, is a pretentious scheme of symbolism—"Mercury and Athena



SIDE PANEL, MONUMENT TO DR. PEPPER
By Karl Bitter

"Advancing the Chariot of Civilization" and "The Triumph of Civilization." Conceptions such as these worked out effectively in plastic form presuppose an exuberant fancy, an intimate knowledge of sculptural possibilities and limitations, and unusual technical ability. In not one point has the artist been found wanting. That he has at times fallen short of his ideal probably no one would be more ready to acknowledge than he; but that the great bulk of this work for architectural adornment—which has been termed "commercial," perhaps because it brings returns, whereas sculpture for sculpture's sake leaves the artist in doubt as to car-fare and studio rent—has unusual charm and great technical excellence, even the most censorious critic must frankly admit. A list of Bitter's work for the last decade shows over fifty commissions, involving several times that number of separate pieces of sculpture, and it is safe to say that no other contemporary American has produced so much in the same length of time, and made so few serious mistakes. If there be any truth in the

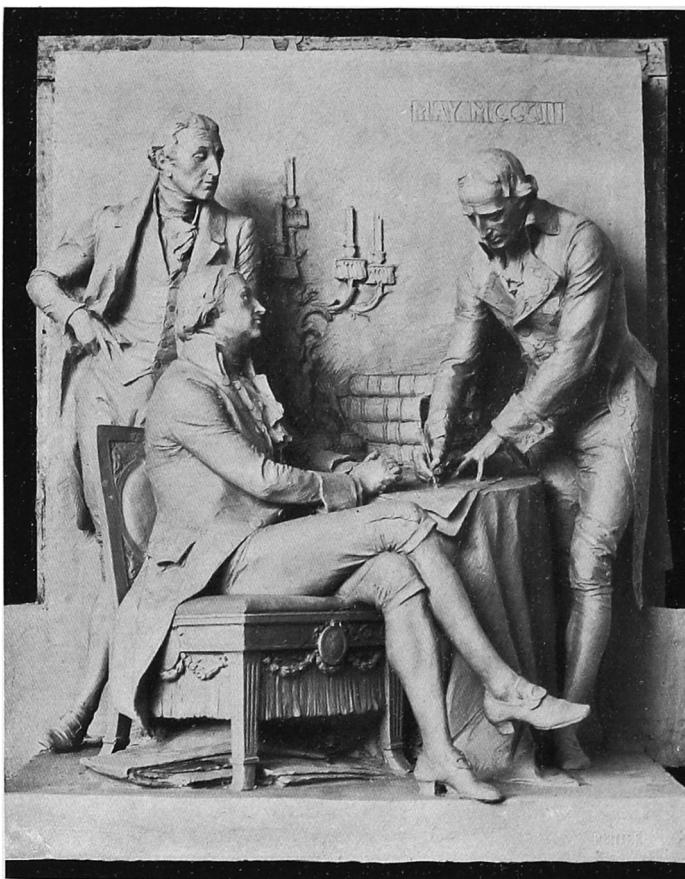
old poetic saying that architecture is frozen music, it gets its truth not less from the intelligent efforts of men like Bitter than from the architects themselves, and the public should therefore feel grateful for such charm and beauty as these earnest and conscientious workers can impart to private and public edifices.

Bitter's sitting statue of Dr. Pepper is the only work he has produced, so far as the writer knows, in straightforward portraiture, and by many this is considered one of his best achievements. Certainly it is eminently realistic, the pose is natural and effective, and the personality of the subject is well expressed. In this instance the sculptor naturally eschewed everything decorative, and devoted himself to catching and recording in enduring form the man whose memory was to be perpetuated, and he has succeeded beyond the cavil of a doubt.

In memorial sculpture Bitter's two most important achievements are his Hubbard monument, Montpelier, Vermont, and his Villard monument, Dobbs Ferry, New York. The accompanying reproductions will give a better idea of these works than any verbal description. They both express or suggest a thought, but, perhaps wisely, leave the idea partly shrouded in mystery. A critic has seen in this mystery an evidence of the ineffectual. I am inclined to think that Mr. Taft has studied the works with more discernment and has more clearly divined the artist's purpose. Says he, of the Villard memorial: "The whole attitude is one of complete relaxation after toil. Is it death, or sleep, or merely day-dreaming? The artist has been kind enough not to tell us. He has conveyed a part of his idea forcibly and without danger of error; he has left to us the privilege of supplying the rest, and thereby he has preserved for us the poetry of his first inspiration." And of the Hubbard memorial the same writer says: "Is it a weary mortal who draws the draperies of his couch about him, a panting soul that sweeps off the cerements of life, or a symbol of the resurrection—a Lazarus who begs mutely to be 'loosed'? The breathlessness, the swaying arms, the grip of the hand, the pressure of the feet, the tangle of the enveloping shroud, give the figure another kind of impressiveness from the awful calm of Saint Gaudens's Sibyl. Mr. Bitter's conception is less majestic, but has an intensity that grows on one. This unknown being, wrapped in its mantle, as in one of Vedder's swirls, this groping, unseeing creature, has in its make-up something of the ideal, of the large and the deep, by virtue of which it seems full of significance. The sculptor must have meant something by it. What its meaning, each must read for himself."

Apart from his personal achievements, Bitter has throughout his career taken the deepest interest in the plastic art of this country, and has exercised a very appreciable influence in its advancement. He has always taken an active part in the affairs of the National Sculpture Society, and for a period was a member of its board of

directors. The high opinion held of him by his fellow-artists is evidenced by their unanimous selection of him for the director of sculpture at Buffalo. He was also chosen as a member of the committee



SIGNING OF THE PURCHASE TREATY
By Karl Bitter

of five in charge of the erection of the naval arch in honor of Admiral Dewey's return, on which, by the way, he did some of the best work himself. As a recognition of his abilities, numerous honors have been accorded him, among which may be named a medal in Chicago in 1892, two silver medals at the Paris World's Fair in 1900, two gold

medals at the Pan-American in 1901, and a silver medal at the Charleston Exposition in 1902. These and similar honors have been well merited. It is safe to say that Bitter's career is little more than begun, despite the intense activity of the last decade, and it is equally safe to predict that the years to come will but add to the fame already acquired. His art now shows a maturity it did not possess when public attention was first directed toward him, and the type of achievement for which he stands is one that meets the approval of the discerning critic. One may reasonably expect large accretions to the serious work in which the artist delights.

H. H. GREER.



VILLARD MEMORIAL
By Karl Bitter